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ABSTRACT

An instructional module designed to help prepare college-level teaching assistants (TAs) for their duties in second language instruction is presented. The module's focus is on second language writing instruction. It first considers the role that writing plays in the teacher's life and the lives of the students, the teacher's attitudes toward writing and its teaching, and the purpose of learning to write in a foreign language. It then looks at various writing tasks and how they might be integrated into a beginning-level, communicatively-based foreign language course. Finally, it examines different systems for evaluating students' written work, and some of the effects evaluation can have on subsequent foreign language writing. It is anticipated that upon completion of the module, the TA will be able to (1) justify a multifaceted, communicative approach to writing during the early stages of second language learning, (2) evaluate the design of a writing task for beginning-level language learners, and (3) determine which evaluation criteria are most appropriate for specific types of writing tasks and learners. Contains 41 references. (MSE)

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ED 433 725

Writing in the Foreign Language Curriculum
Soup and (Fire)crackers

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University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

one of a series of modules for the

Professional Preparation of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages

Grace Stovall Burkart, Editor
Center for Applied Linguistics
Washington, DC

December 1998

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Writing in the Foreign Language Curriculum
Soup and (Fire)crackers

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Introduction

Writing is a dangerous, magical, furtive, courageous, passionate activity. Edicts, incantations, prayers, formulae, secret messages, graffiti, declarations of rights, laws, and love notes attest that the written word influences our lives in ways unbounded by time or distance. And yet for many people, writing is better characterized as "painful," "difficult," or—worse—"boring." In this module, we will first consider the role that writing plays in your lives and the lives of your students, your attitudes towards writing and the teaching of writing, and the purpose of learning to write in a foreign language. Later, we will look at various kinds of writing tasks and determine how they might be integrated into a beginning-level, communicatively-based foreign language course. Finally, we will investigate different systems for the evaluation of students' written work as well as some of the effects that evaluation can have on subsequent foreign language writing.

Upon completion of the module, you should be able to (1) justify a multifaceted, communicative approach to writing during the early stages of foreign language learning, (2) evaluate the design of a writing task for beginning-level language learners, and (3) determine which evaluation criteria are most appropriate for specific types of writing tasks and learners.

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Words! Words! We're Surrounded by Words!

To begin our discussion of writing, let's first consider what we *read*. Take two to three minutes to list as many types of texts as you can. Include everything you read—in your first language as well as your second language—in your everyday lives, not only in an academic context.

_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Ask a volunteer to record everyone's replies on the board or an overhead projector. Once all the responses have been transcribed, compare your list with a list recently generated by a group of undergraduates at a large public university (Appendix A). Which items did you include that they didn't? Which did they incorporate that you didn't think of? Now divide your lists into two columns: texts you read in your first language and those you read in your second language. Which kinds of texts—first language and second language—do you read more frequently? Why? Put a check (✓) next to the texts that you have not only *read*, but also *written in your first language*. Put a star (★) next to the texts you have *written in your second language*. What impresses you most about the lists you've examined?

Reading and writing are intimately linked. While it is true that not everyone who can read can also write, it is also obvious that without writers readers would be out of business! And even though we personally may not produce every type of document, each text—from TV listings to computer manuals to *The Divine Comedy*—was created by a writer somewhere. From the myriad kinds of texts we read daily, it is abundantly clear that although authors are typically invisible—we rarely see people in the actual process of writing—the written products are both ubiquitous and diverse: they appear in a wide range of contexts; they are intended for a variety of audiences, each created for a particular purpose. In order to craft effective texts, ones that communicate successfully with readers, authors must keep in mind the purpose, audience, and context for which they are writing.

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Take a few minutes now to go through the list of texts you prepared earlier and state for each (1) who the writer's audience is (whether it is general, specific, or highly specialized; its gender, age, and social class) and (2) the purpose for the writing (to entertain, to inform, to persuade, to frighten, to solicit, to enamor). Which texts are easiest to categorize? Why? Is any one kind of audience or purpose "better" than any other? Which kinds of text do you most enjoy reading? Which do you like to write? In your opinion, is there any kind of text that shouldn't be written (or read) in an academic context? Why?

Not all readers aspire to be professional writers—very few of us will ever write a bestseller—but we are all authors of some kind or another, even if only of classnotes, memos, and grocery lists. The very act of writing can help us clarify our thoughts, organize our ideas, test our knowledge of a topic. And even in our image-oriented society, writing remains a powerful form of communication. Which of the texts that you listed would you also want to help your students learn to write? Why? How do you think that your decision to pursue graduate studies affects your attitudes toward writing?

Consider This: Did anyone include "compositions" in the list of things they read? The undergraduates (Appendix A) didn't. Why not? Who is the audience for a composition? In what context does composition writing occur? What is its purpose?

Writing: Inspiration and Perspiration

In any treatment of foreign language pedagogy, reference is usually made either to "the four skills" (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) or to the "receptive" skills (listening and reading) versus the "productive" ones (speaking and writing). Instead, a more apt distinction might be made between "interpretive" skills and "expressive" skills, terms which better capture the many factors that comprise understanding and creating a text—oral or written. Interpretation of an oral text, for example, involves much more than listening: it may also entail watching a speaker's facial expression, gestures, and body language while simultaneously taking into account the context in which the message is conveyed in addition to processing the actual words of message. Moreover, listening and reading are not the passive acts that a term like "receptive" might suggest. Likewise, writing is much more than the physical act of forming symbols on paper (or at a keyboard). It entails recursive thinking and often includes both speaking (in an information-gathering phase as well as talking over ideas with other people prior to or during the writing process) and reading (for example, performing multiple readings of the text as it is being written).

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Consider This: Some people claim that writing is a lonely activity because the physical act of transcribing words on paper—or at a computer keyboard—is done alone. Others see it as highly social because—once created—a text can communicate with countless people over an extended period of time and space. What has your experience with writing been? Is it the same as when you were an undergraduate? How might it change in the future?

Writing is an expressive skill. Of all the texts you (and the undergraduates) listed earlier, were any written with the sole purpose of practicing grammar? How is writing in the "real world" different from the kind of writing typically done in language classes? Is it possible to do "real world" writing in a beginning foreign language class? Why or why not? In your opinion, should writing instruction in a foreign language prepare students for the kinds of foreign language writing they might need or want to do when they've left the university, or should it concentrate on only the kinds of writing that might be required in an academic setting?

Great Expectations

Language teachers and students hold many beliefs about language learning. Such beliefs undoubtedly influence what goes on in classrooms. However, no matter what your particular beliefs may be regarding what second language learning should look like, research in second language acquisition has established that learning another language is a developmental process; that is, it proceeds in what appear to be immutable stages, at varying rates for individual learners. (For an excellent introduction to the findings of recent research in second language acquisition, see Lightbown and Spada, 1992.) Based on the ample body of evidence from content-based instruction, we also know that interpretive skills in the second language develop much more quickly than expressive skills (Harley, Allen, Cummins, and Swain, 1990). In fact, within an immersion-type approach, students can attain native-like interpretive skills. On the other hand, expressive skills require a much longer period to develop, especially in an instructional setting, even in the most communicative classrooms (Swain, 1985). Ironically, the ability that students covet most—the ability to speak the second language in a native-like manner—requires the longest period of growth.

The developmental nature of second language acquisition means that certain linguistic features will become part of learners' spontaneous expressive repertoires first, others later, still others much, much later, *regardless of when or how the structures have been taught*. This last point is fundamental to an understanding of the goal of communicative language teaching in the early stages of the foreign language curriculum in general, and the goal of

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writing instruction in particular. As writing is a communicative act, it certainly deserves a place in the foreign language curriculum, but teachers and learners alike must understand that students' messages—oral and written—will not be structurally perfect nor always culturally appropriate, particularly in the early stages of acquisition. Help with the native speaker's interpretation of a student-generated text can be provided by the teacher; problems with linguistic accuracy must be accepted as part of the natural, developmental, and lengthy process of learning another language.

Despite features that oral and written expression share, the two skills are not identical in nature. Writing is not simply "speaking on paper" (Dvorak, 1987). Discourse conventions are just one difference between them. Unlike speaking, when we can look at our interlocutor's face to gauge how well we're being understood, or check for comprehension and explain what it was we "meant to say," writing—once completed—is non-negotiable. The writer can no more stop the reader to ask, "Did you understand what I wrote here?" than the reader can ask the writer to explain something in the text another way. Because of this limitation, writing forces us to communicate in a clearer and more exact way than we express ourselves orally.

Writing is unlike speaking in yet another way: authors seldom have to write "on their feet"; they have time to think and to organize what they want to convey. In many situations, writers have the time to re-read what they have written; to consult a native speaker, a dictionary, or a grammar; to elicit feedback from a reader; to revise; and, finally, to edit their work. Certain formal kinds of writing—term papers and research articles, for example—demand just such revision and editing; shopping lists and informal e-mail messages do not. In the former instances, therefore, a higher level of precision is expected in the final version of the written work than we find in the latter, or in spontaneous oral expression.

The accuracy demanded by certain types of formal writing tasks in conjunction with the developmental nature of second language acquisition is a potential source of pedagogical conflict. Ways to address this issue will be discussed in the section on feedback and evaluation at the end of the module.

Consider This: Some teachers (and learners) believe that everything students produce in the second language must be error free, holding themselves to a standard that doesn't exist even in their first languages. What effect do you think this has on the way students perceive the second language and their ability to use it?

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First- vs. Second- vs. Foreign-language Writing

If you're looking for a dissertation topic, here's one area that merits exploration: writing in a foreign language. The theoretical frameworks currently in use to examine writing—as a cognitive process (Flower and Hayes, 1981), as a social act (Cooper and Holzman, 1989), or as a product of the two (Flower, 1994)—derive largely from studies done in first language settings: that is, by native speakers writing for other native speakers, usually novice writers in the process of becoming more expert. It has been assumed that writing in one's first language and writing in a second language involve similar, if not identical, processes.

In a review of second language writing research, Silva (1993) acknowledges the existence of some universal aspects of writing, but he also points to evidence that suggests some major differences between the two: namely, that "though general composing process patterns are similar in L1 and L2 [first and second language], it is clear that L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective" (p. 668). In addition, the texts produced by second language writers are structurally different from those created by first language writers: that is, they are "less fluent" and "less accurate" (ibid.).

Two obvious factors that contribute to differences between first language and second language writers are first language writers' extensive experience with varieties of written discourse and their native linguistic competence. Moreover, the research on second language writing is almost entirely based on studies conducted with university-level students enrolled in English as a second language (ESL) programs: learners who are highly literate in their first language; who have already had many years of instruction in their second language, English; who demonstrate advanced levels of second language proficiency; and for whom highly-developed literacy skills in the second language are crucial to their academic success.

The few studies that look at students enrolled in foreign language curricula at the university level must address the cognitive skills and level of first language literacy that the students possess while at the same time taking into account the limited exposure they have had to the second language. Although applications of second language writing research serve as a springboard for innovation in the foreign language curriculum (Kroll, 1990), the differences between the populations underscore the importance of further research to determine the generalizability of findings from ESL to foreign language populations, as well as from first language to foreign language research.

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Consider This: Which, if any, of the conditions in which university-level ESL students find themselves match those of the undergraduate students in your beginning foreign language class? In what ways are they very different? Should writing instruction for the more advanced foreign language student who intends to study abroad be equivalent to the ESL situation at your university? Why or why not?

Put It in Writing! Task Design

Up to this point, we have listed the types of texts that we and our students read, and we have differentiated texts we read from those we typically write. We have also seen that writing in the "real world" is a communicative act in which an author attempts to convey a message to a particular audience within a certain context and for a specific purpose. Viewed in this way, writing offers another option for communicative language use in the foreign language classroom, as long as such inclusion pays heed to the particular population for which it is designed: namely, adult learners, cognitively mature and literate in their first language, but who have had limited exposure to the foreign language.

In this section, we will look at two different kinds of writing tasks: transcription and composition. Suggestions for how to use writing tasks of both types at the very earliest stages of learning to communicate in a foreign language will be presented. For each, we will see how the issues of audience, purpose, and context influence the written outcome. Keep in mind that although there is a useful distinction between the terms "transcription" and "composition," the two types of tasks are better described as a continuum, rather than clear-cut categories.

Transcription-oriented writing

Transcription is the act of copying words, spoken or written. At one end of the continuum—tracing letters, for example—it is "writing" at its most elemental. We transcribe when we copy homework assignments from the board, fill out job applications specifying all the schools we've attended and the positions that we've held, play word games like Scattergories or Hangman, write ourselves shopping and "things-to-do" lists, and list the advantages and disadvantages of going to graduate school in order to make a career choice. Any of these transcription-oriented writing tasks could easily be performed in the foreign language classroom.

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The purpose of a transcription-oriented writing task will determine both its appropriateness for adult foreign language learners and how well it can be integrated into a broader instructional context. For example, are students filling out forms in the foreign language to apply for a tourist visa or a student exchange program? Are they preparing lists of the advantages and disadvantages of study abroad to inform a whole-class discussion or debate? Are they creating an inventory of appropriate clothing to pack, gifts to bring, or social behaviors to guide them in the foreign language environment? If so, then the transcription activities meet the criterion that they be responsive to learners' need to use the foreign language in a meaningful way.

A communicative approach to foreign language instruction will avoid assigning writing tasks for the sole purpose of practicing language structures. Instead, writing activities will integrate cultural and personal perspectives, along with information derived from lectures, readings, and discussions. Throughout the writing process learners will use the new language to express, interpret, and negotiate their own meanings, not merely to translate predetermined ones.

When does linguistic accuracy become an issue in beginning foreign language writing? In the case of personal notes—where the audience and the author are the same person—attention to form is not crucial: the writers only need to be able to decipher what they themselves have written. On the other hand, other types of transcription tasks—the completion of official forms, for example—require that one print legibly, in uppercase letters, with attention to accurate spelling and the way dates are written in the foreign language.

Other ways in which beginning-level learners might use functional transcription skills would be to publish a class directory by transcribing each other's names, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses as they are given orally by each individual. Students might want to include other information in the directory as well: where to find tutoring help, how to locate foreign language magazines and newspapers, reviews of local restaurants and cafés, and listings of upcoming foreign language films. In the most elaborate scenario, students would assume responsibility for the design, layout, editing, and publication of the directory.

A more typical use of transcription skills involves students being given pictures of vocabulary items to label in the second language (Omaggio Hadley, 1993). Although this kind of transcription is suggested in many foreign language teaching manuals, one must be aware of the limited cognitive challenge it presents to university-level students. On the other hand, crossword puzzles are a particular type of transcription that can employ either illustrations or simple descriptions as clues. As students become more proficient in their expressive skills they might create their own crossword puzzles for their peers to solve. An even more straightforward transcription task involves students' creation of word search puzzles in which their classmates must search the puzzle—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally—for the words listed (or illustrations provided). Still using illustrations as a prompt, students might also be encouraged to create a class dictionary, by writing simple

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definitions in the second language and providing grammatical information (noun, verb, adjective, adverb), along with an example of the word used in context. Such a dictionary, prepared by students, could be used as a study aid or as a reference for subsequent classes to build upon. In each of the latter examples of transcription-oriented writing (the class directory, crossword puzzle, word search puzzle, and personal dictionary), the audience and the purpose for the writing demand absolute accuracy.

Another example of a transcription-oriented activity that has proven appeal for undergraduates is the MindReader game. Its aim is strictly recreational; that's a "real world" purpose, too! To play, students form teams of three to five members each. Every member of the team is given a stack of scrap paper and a pen. The game leader begins by reading aloud a category in the second language: for example, "a fruit." Everyone has 15 seconds to write one word that fits the category. During this time no one shares answers. When the time limit is up, teams take turns presenting their answers to the group. Points are scored as follows: one point for each word that correctly fits the category; zero points if the word does not. Teams earn one additional point for each match; that is, every time a word has been repeated by another member of their team. So, if a team's responses were "banana," "apple," "peach," and "banana" the team would receive four points (one for each of the four correct responses) plus one additional point (for the "banana" match) for a total of five points. If the students had written "banana," "apple," "banana," and "potato" the team would receive only four points (for three correct responses and one match). Finally, if they had written "banana," "banana," "banana," and "potato" they would receive five points (for three correct responses and two matches). As you can see, to earn the most points students must not only understand the oral clue and write an appropriate second language word, they must also take into consideration which response their teammates will most likely provide. It is precisely this last feature of the game that makes it ever so slightly more challenging—and interesting. Note that the specificity of the vocabulary required depends upon the categories constructed. (Appendix B provides additional examples of possible categories and how to expand upon them.)

Consider This: Teachers have different teaching styles, just as learners have different learning styles. Which of the transcription-oriented writing activities presented most appeals to your particular teaching style? Why? Why might it be important to include in your instructional repertoire a few writing activities that might not be your favorites? Why would you need to be especially careful about how you present those activities to your students?

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Composition-oriented writing

Whether they are fun, challenging, or simply pragmatic, transcription-oriented activities limit the scope of students' expression. This may be why many teachers and students are comfortable using them at the very beginning levels of foreign language learning. Careful control of learners' output reduces the likelihood of structural errors. However, unlike merely copying words or compiling lists, composition entails a more complicated process: it involves the combination of words and phrases to express ideas and feelings, to convince, to muse, to instigate, to inform, to delight. Once again, the issue of audience, context, and purpose influences the written outcome. In a dissertation devoted to the examination of the effect of task design on foreign language learners' writing, Paulson (1993) found that students produced more thoughtful, more effective, and more accurate compositions when (1) the task was stated in terms of a problem to be solved, and (2) the audience for the writing was clearly indicated. Keeping in mind the notion that writing is a communicative act, how might composition-oriented writing tasks be used in a beginning-level foreign language classroom?

One of the most common—and well-researched—forms of composition-oriented writing is the dialogue journal. In this kind of writing, students keep a sort of diary in the foreign language. In a separate notebook used solely for the journal, students write about their daily lives, university studies, expectations, feelings, and activities. No topics are assigned: students are encouraged to write freely about whatever they like. Diary writing, by definition, is informal and personal. And because in its purest form it is intended for the author's eyes only, some adjustment must be made for its use in a pedagogical context. So, students are informed from the start that this is a particular kind of diary, a dialogue journal, which they will share with their instructor. (Because some students may never have kept a journal before, it is important to remind them of what will *not* be accepted as journal entries: namely, lists of words, transcriptions of other texts, or translations.) The number of entries to be written each week is agreed upon beforehand, and the importance of making entries on a regular basis throughout the course is emphasized: little progress will be seen if all the entries are written within the span of a week or two.

Since journal writing is a (semi-)private, informal kind of writing, structural accuracy is not a major concern. Instructors collect the journals and read them, but they are asked to respond to the *content* of students' journal entries, rather than to the form. The teacher's comments are meant to encourage learners to expand on a topic, clarify a misunderstanding, or relate some relevant information about their own lives. Thus, dialogue journals are not "corrected." Their purpose is to develop fluency and confidence in written communication. Certainly, if an individual student repeatedly misuses a particular lexical item, the instructor might provide a comment in the margin, but any kind of editing of the writing would be totally inappropriate for the genre. On the other hand, teachers may find it useful to record separately any frequently-occurring errors that appear to be common to all students. Such errors could be brought to the attention of the whole class for some focused explanation of "grammar in context." It is important to keep in mind, however, that the developmental stage of the learners may preclude the disappearance of the mistake in subsequent instances of

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spontaneous expression. By the way, journals are an excellent way to document students' progress in the foreign language. Beginning learners in particular will be able to see how far they have progressed from their earliest entries to the last (Casanave, 1994). And instructors who are interested in investigating developmental stages of acquisition will find that journals are rich sources of linguistic data.

Consider This: Here are sample entries from three different first semester students' journals. (English translations of the Spanish appear in Appendix C.) The teachers' comments are also included. Which teacher best understands the purpose of journal writing in the foreign language curriculum? Which student? How did you arrive at your conclusions?

Example A

(Student's entry) Me gusta mucho de mis clases esta semestre. Los libros para mi clase de "advertising" por ejemplo, son muy interesante. Mis libros de economía son muy fascinante también. Los libros de español son facil comprender. Pero, creo que un libro para mi clase de español no es muy necesario.

(Teacher's comment) ¿Es aburrido?

(Student's entry continues) La semana próxima tengo dos examens para mis clases de economía. Esta semana tengo estudiar. Economía es una clase difícil comprender a veces. Es una clase de comercio. Es tambien mi especialidad en la facultad de Artes y Ciencias.

(Teacher's comment) ¿Qué trabajo quieres tener en el futuro?

Examples continue on next page

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Example B

(Student's entry)

¿Cómo está? —Bien, gracias.

El estudiante escriba el papel.

Ustedes desean hablar español.

Tú bailas bien.

Nosotros cantamos mucho.

Vosotros deseáis comprar los libros.

Ella estudia francés.

(Teacher's comment) [none]

Example C

(Student's entry) Mi familia es muy pequeño, pero muy cercano. Mi padre es un profesor de la educación física a una escuela secondaría. Mi madre eneña educación especial en la misma escula. Mi hermano Gary tiene dieciseis años, y él juega fútbol americano, basketbol, y beisbol. Mi hermana Allison tiene ocho años y le gusta gimnasia.

(Teacher's comment) Mi familia es muy pequeño, pero muy ~~cercano~~. Mi padre es un profesor de la educación física a una escuela secondaría. Mi madre eneña educación especial en la misma escula. Mi hermano Gary tiene dieciséis años, y él juega fútbol americano, basketbol, y beisbol. Mi hermana Allison tiene ocho años y le gusta gimnasia.

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Used correctly, dialogue journals provide a context for real communication between individual students and the teacher. Expansion of the audience for written communication among learners can be facilitated through the use of e-mail and electronic conferencing software. Teachers may post an opinion-provoking statement on an electronic bulletin board and ask students to respond. In this context, the structural accuracy of learners' messages would be subject to a comprehensibility standard imposed by their peers. Incomprehensible messages would receive either no reaction from classmates, or a request for clarification. Students would receive credit for each post they make. Although the potential exists for interesting, relevant, "real world" communication to occur, instructors should be aware that the discourse conventions for electronic communication are not clearly delineated: the format may foster a discourse for which you are unprepared. Kern (1995) provides some fascinating data on how the use of an electronic format significantly increased the amount and diversity of first-year foreign language students' participation in class discussions.

Another kind of composition-oriented writing uses the notion of "information-gap" as a proven means to increase communication (Doughty and Pica, 1986). Tasks are created in which different people possess information that others need to accomplish a goal. Here, too, teachers must construct the writing task carefully so that the audience, purpose, and context for the writing are clear. The directions for one such task involving physical description are as follows:

> Your employer GloboNet has sent you to the airport to pick up the representative of AmerXec who will be serving as a consultant on an important project. The only way you can identify the person (you don't even know if it is a man or a woman!) is by the following description, faxed to your office this morning. (Student-prepared description attached.)

Student A's task is to identify the visiting consultant (either from among class members or from a set of photographs), based on the written description.

Instead, Student B receives these instructions:

> A member of your firm AmerXec will be serving as a consultant to GloboNet, based in [name of country in which the target language is the primary language]. Because you are one of the few employees who knows [the target language], you have been asked to fax a description of the consultant so that a representative from GloboNet will be able to identify her/him at the airport. Your boss wants to make sure that GloboNet has no trouble locating the consultant, so please ask someone to check your description before you send it and make any necessary changes. (Keep in mind that you can't be sure what the person will be wearing, so you should probably focus on physical traits.)

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Student B's task is to draft a description, run it by at least one other classmate for comments, and then write the final version. (See Appendix D for a writing sample produced by a student for this exercise.)

The activity could also be carried out with students working in teams, instead of pairs, making the writing and its interpretation a cooperative effort. A natural evaluation of the writing would be whether or not the visitor was readily identified. Whether the task is completed in pairs or as a team effort, the teacher should be prepared to react to the description of the visitor from the perspective of a native speaker, and a discussion of culturally appropriate and meaningful physical descriptors might well ensue.

In a similar vein, students might compose "personal ads," looking for a potential roommate or a study partner, from among the members of the class. Again, in information-gap activities learners must communicate (orally or in writing) in the foreign language in order to solve a problem or complete a task: their use of the foreign language is always both meaning focused and purposeful.

Many teachers feel comfortable with the guided composition, in which students are first given carefully constructed and sequenced questions to answer, and then are asked to compose an essay based on their responses. An example of this kind of composition-oriented writing exercise follows. Note that even in the following guided composition, the audience, purpose, and context for the writing are made explicit.

In the Good Ol' Days

Have you ever enjoyed listening to the stories that older people tell about their childhood? Did you ever think that some day *you* might be doing the same? Today you have a chance to reminisce with your classmates and teacher about what it was like when you were a kid!

Step 1. Think back to one year of elementary school that you remember particularly well. Take your time to reminisce, so that one particular memory becomes vivid.

Step 2. Describe that time, jotting down answers to the following questions:

1. How old were you?
2. Which year of school was it? first grade? second? third? fourth? fifth? sixth?
3. What was the name of your school?
4. Where was it?
5. Did you like your teacher? What was her/his name?
6. What was the teacher like?
7. What did you use to do at school? What did you use to do after school?
8. What did you like about school?

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9. What did you want to be when you grew up?
10. Why do you remember this particular time so well?

Step 3. Now, take the answers to the preceding 10 questions and turn them into a story about you and elementary school.

1. Use the answers to Questions 1-4 to help you write the first paragraph, in which you describe the setting.
2. Use the answers to Questions 5 and 6 to describe your teacher in the second paragraph.
3. In the third paragraph, use the answers to Questions 7-9 to describe what you used to do in school and after school and what your aspirations were at that age.
4. Reflect on your answer to the last question, and in the concluding paragraph explain why the memory of that particular year of school remains vivid today.
5. Give your story a title.

Step 4. STOP. Read your story all the way through. After you've finished, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does the story flow smoothly? Does it have a beginning, a middle, and an end? Is there a logical connection between paragraphs?
- Does the story have a purpose? What is it (to entertain, to teach a lesson, to evoke sympathy)?
- Does the choice of words used convey the feeling I want to project (humor, warning, excitement)?
- Is the story interesting? Will it capture the attention of my audience?

Based on your answers to these questions, make changes to your story to improve it.

Step 5. Make two clean copies of your story and bring them to class with you. Find two students to act as your audience. Give them each a copy of your story to look at as you read it aloud to them.

Step 6. Ask your listener-readers to tell you what they liked about your story. Write down what they say. Now ask the readers if they have any suggestions to make your story even better. Ask them to show you exactly where it could use some improvement and write down any suggestions that they have for how to change it.

Step 7. Rewrite your story, using your readers' comments to guide you.

Step 8. Lastly, edit your final version of the story. Check that:

- all the endings of the verbs match their subjects;
- you've chosen the forms of the verbs that best convey your meaning;
- all adjectives agree with nouns (feminine/masculine,

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singular/plural).
[or other appropriate second language structures]

Note that Steps 5 and 6 ask the students to share their writing within a peer group. These particular steps of the writing process will be examined more closely in the next section on feedback and evaluation. For now suffice it to mention that it is also possible for the teacher to respond to the content and organization of the writing at these points.

Finally, the key to using guided composition writing successfully in the communicative foreign language classroom is the way in which it is integrated into the instructional program. Are the compositions simply handed in and given a grade by the teacher or does the content of the essays provide the basis for a subsequent lesson or activity? In other words, who is the audience and what is the purpose of the guided composition? In the *In the Good Ol' Days* example, the students' final compositions might be used to prepare a generational profile of the students; after which, they might be compared to a similar text (contemporary or not, literary or otherwise) in the foreign language to critically examine similarities and differences between their experiences and those of someone in another time and place. Or they may serve as a springboard to an introduction to the system of elementary education in the foreign language country. Students might also be asked to consider how an elementary school experience might be more generalizable to the foreign language context than a secondary school experience.

Integration of the writing task into the whole curriculum confirms the notion that writing is not simply a skill to be acquired or displayed; rather it is a powerful shaper of the way we view ourselves and the world. Failure to pay attention to audience and purpose in designing foreign language writing tasks will result in students' reduction of the task to one whose purpose is "merely to complete the assignment" (Lee and VanPatten, 1995, p. 221) and they—as writers—may provide only "what the instructor wants" (ibid.).

Gaudiani (1981) has written a well known book about foreign language composition for the more advanced (third-year) university level, but while it offers a pedagogy that is sensitive to the problems foreign language learners confront when faced with a composition-oriented writing task, it was written before communicative language teaching took hold in foreign language curricula, and so it does not present a communicative perspective on writing. Issues of audience, purpose, and context are secondary to structural accuracy and form. Because *teachers'* expectations regarding foreign language writing profoundly affect students' written texts as well as their reactions to various kinds of feedback they receive, those issues will be addressed in the final section of this module.

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Consider This: Careful! Don't confuse guided writing with grammar practice or translation activities. How does the following topic, typical of many composition activities found in foreign language textbooks, differ from the *In the Good Ol' Days* task you've just examined?

> Write a five-sentence paragraph in which you describe your plans for a summer vacation. Say when you will leave, where you will go, how you will get there, and what you will do when you arrive. Be sure to use the simple future tense.

In content-based instruction, where learners study subject matter through the medium of the foreign language, students are often asked to do various kinds of composition-oriented *academic* writing: for example, sentence-level definitions, hypothesis statements, and summaries. They might also be asked to convert text to tables and vice versa. Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989) provide excellent examples of the kinds of academic writing tasks typically used in content-based instructional programs. However, keep in mind that many of the activities the authors present were created with a relatively advanced ESL population in mind and would require adaptation to the foreign language classroom, especially at beginning levels of instruction. On the other hand, there is nothing to prevent even very early-stage learners from successfully completing a content-based writing task, similar to the following:

> The following assignment is due tomorrow: "Write a single paragraph in which you describe the most salient features of the physical geography of Italy. You will receive one point for each correct piece of information you provide."
>
> Unfortunately, you missed the class during which the instructor went over this information. Thank goodness, you've always been pretty good in geography, and you have borrowed a classmate's notes to help you out. But when you open Sylvia's notebook, you realize that she takes very sketchy notes indeed! Here's all you have to go on:
>
> penisola, Mare Mediterraneo. mari: Adriatico, Ionio, Tirreno, Ligure, di Sardegna. paesi confinano: Spagna (ovest), Francia (nord-ovest), Svizzera & Austria (nord), Slovenia (est). catene montuose: Alpi (N, O->E);

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Appennini (N->S). 2 isole, GRANDI: Sicilia, Sardegna. Fiume +lungo = il Po. Pianura padana = fertile, coltivazione agricola.

In this instance, the student uses the key words to produce a coherent foreign language paragraph. The evaluation criteria are built into the assignment: one point for each correct piece of information.

Finally, a discussion of writing would be incomplete without mention of creative writing. Stories, poems, songs are all examples of creative writing tasks that have been suggested for use in the foreign language classroom (Lach-Newinsky and Seletzky, 1986; Maley and Duff, 1989; Omaggio Hadley, 1993, among others). What role does this kind of writing—whose purpose is not to inform, but to enrich—have in the beginning-level foreign language classroom? Kramsch (1993) provides a convincing argument in favor of poetry-writing in the foreign language, citing above all the pleasure students can derive from it. Interestingly, she suggests that students receive feedback on their poetry within peer response groups (pp. 170-171), along much the same lines as indicated in the guided composition example above.

Consider This: In a research article delightfully entitled "Spinach to Chocolate," Winer (1992) provides insight into prospective teachers' reactions to second language writing and how to teach it. One of the most interesting revelations came as the student teachers were asked to complete the writing assignments they themselves had created: most found them uninteresting and pointless! A good rule of thumb to follow when you've prepared a writing assignment is to actually do it yourself *before* you give it to your students. How do you think this might improve the tasks?

Caution! Dictionary in Use!

Vocabulary acquisition is just beginning to receive the attention it merits in second language research. Although learners have long felt that an extensive vocabulary is essential to understanding and using the second language, textbooks have traditionally given precedence to rules of morphology and syntax over lexicon and lexical semantics, under the assumption that learners will simply plug the right words into the structures. The subtitle of this module, "soup and (fire)crackers," addresses the danger of relying on a dictionary to supplement the limited vocabulary of most beginning foreign language writers.

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Experienced teachers of composition regale us with examples of students' misuse of words and expressions: "My mother agitated the cake." (The student was looking for a synonym for "mix.") or "Drop your pants here and have a good time!" (from a sign in a dry cleaner's window). The first semester learner of Italian who wrote "minestra e petardi" to describe what she had eaten for dinner the previous evening ingested the wrong kind of "crackers," to be sure! Another foreign language learner protested that he didn't care for the football "carriage," unaware that there is more than one kind of "coach." A student of French created an interesting hybrid: "les oiseaux mouche." Birds *do* fly, but only as a verb; genetic engineering doesn't yet allow for a bird-insect combination!

Mistakes of this kind are inevitable, as beginning language learners grope for words to express their intended meanings. A brief lesson in dictionary use might avert some of the errors. A discussion of the problem with literal translation and the lack of one-to-one correspondence between words in their first language and in the second language would expand learners' appreciation for the richness and subtlety of language. More importantly, a sustained curricular focus on the development of an abundant and varied vocabulary would go a long way toward easing the linguistic burden of foreign language writing.

In the meantime, very early-stage learners might appreciate a pre-composing brainstorming session in which a list of relevant vocabulary is generated by the class and reproduced on the board or a handout. Again, in classrooms where the focus is on the exchange of meaningful information, instructors must be careful not to supply students with a prefabricated list from which to simply select vocabulary. Rather, they will need to elicit from the students themselves the lexical items that they need to communicate their own meanings for the purpose and audience at hand.

Consider This: Do you have any funny examples of non-native writing to share? Have you ever been in a second language situation where you used the wrong word? How did you feel when it was pointed out to you?

Responding to Students' Writing: Feedback and Evaluation

In the section on task design we have seen how the context, audience, and purpose of the writing affect the final written product. It makes sense that the criteria used to evaluate such writing take into consideration those same factors. In fact, we've seen that some writing tasks seem to have appropriate evaluation criteria built right in. Certain types of writing—for example, crossword puzzles, official forms, telephone listings, and formal publications—require strict attention to structural accuracy. Personal lists, notes, informal communication, and dialogue journal entries do not. On the other hand, due to the

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developmental nature of second language acquisition, assigning composition-oriented writing tasks that demand high levels of structural accuracy—for example, formal essays, term papers, business correspondence, and editorials—to early-stage learners will likely result in frustration and avoidance of foreign language writing.

When crafting a formal piece of writing for an audience outside themselves, good writers plan, organize, draft, read, discuss, re-read, revise, and edit their work to ensure that their messages are conveyed as effectively as possible. There is a great deal of research—first language and second language—on peer response as a way to promote these aspects of writing. Some of the advantages to using such groups are that they encourage collaborative interaction among learners (Bruffee, 1984; De Guerrero and Villamil, 1994); they provide opportunities for students to practice politeness strategies (Johnson and Yang, 1990); they result in a greater level of student involvement in the writing task (Stanley, 1992); and they generate a variety of negotiation strategies among learners (Mendonça and Johnson, 1994). De Guerrero and Villamil (1994) also contend that through such interaction students are "provided by others with strategic behavior that they can later model and apply on their own" (p. 493). It should be noted, however, that in peer response groups made up wholly of foreign language students who share a common first language, they may well resort to it in order to complete Steps 5 and 6 of the composition process (see the *In the Good Ol' Days* exercise). If the instructor wishes instead to keep all interaction in the foreign language, students may need to be given key phrases to help them express their suggestions in the foreign language ("It would be better," "It's not clear," "This doesn't make sense."). In a welcome study of peer response and its effect on revision in a first-year foreign language curriculum, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) report that it *is* possible to maintain the foreign language environment throughout the revision process and that collaborative revision resulting from the use of peer response groups enhances the content, organization, and vocabulary of students' writing in the foreign language to a significantly greater extent than careful teacher feedback.

Importantly, Leki (1991) notes that the kind of feedback that university-level ESL students say they want to receive on their writing is a direct reflection of their beliefs about language learning (based on previous language learning experiences?) and their perception of the teacher's (or the institution's) expectations of them. She reports that students who believe that what they produce in the second language must be structurally perfect will be frustrated by a teacher or by peers who insist on giving relatively large amounts of attention to content and the validity of the ideas expressed in the writing, while paying scant attention to surface grammatical errors. These findings are particularly interesting because such learner beliefs continue to exist despite research that shows that university professors in content areas other than English composition react much more negatively to second language learners' errors in content and organization than they do to surface grammatical mistakes (Santos, 1988; Johns, 1993). Clearly, teachers and learners of second language writing must establish beforehand realistic expectations for the kind of feedback that will be provided and why.

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Despite a tenacious belief that correcting students' errors will result in their elimination, the developmental nature of second language acquisition does not support that belief. Furthermore, research has shown that beginning-level foreign language learners are not good at correcting their own or each others' grammatical errors, even when given some indication from the teacher that an error exists (Frantzen and Rissell, 1987; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1992). Interestingly, even Gaudiani's 1981 examples of students' compositions reveal recurring grammatical errors, despite her careful correction of students' drafts. Moreover, teachers who emphasize grammatical accuracy as a first step in the writing process receive subsequent drafts of students' writing in which only surface errors are corrected, leaving glaring organizational and content errors intact (Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994).

Can nothing be done to improve the accuracy of students' writing? Semke (1984) and Robb, Ross, and Shortreed (1986) both found that the single best predictor of improvement in students' writing was the amount of second language writing that they produced; that is, writing improves significantly the more students write. Semke reports that instructors who commented on the content of students' writing resulted in learners who wrote more and with greater accuracy than did those who received any form of error correction. In a similar vein, Frantzen (1995) found that within a content-based foreign language instructional sequence second year university-level learners' written accuracy improved as much as a control group's, despite the fact that the control group had received explicit grammatical instruction (daily grammar review and error correction on written work), whereas the experimental group had received none. Conversely, Lalande (1982) found that second-year university learners of German could improve the accuracy of their writing more by correcting coded errors and tracking the number and kinds of errors they made throughout the semester than by simply correcting mistakes flagged by their instructor. Unfortunately, his study did not compare the effect of no error correction at all, as did the other studies, nor did it address issues of content or organization in students' writing.

Research has shown that correcting every grammatical error, especially in composition-oriented writing, is not an effective way to improve students' performance, besides it being a laborious and time-consuming task for the instructor. But if not by grammar correction, how might teachers respond to students' writing?

Here are the writing tasks we've discussed:

a. dialogue journal
b. crossword puzzle
c. geography paragraph
d. foreign visitor at the airport problem
e. *In the Good Ol'Days* composition
f. personal dictionary
g. MindReader game

Here are some evaluation criteria that have been used in beginning-level foreign language classes. Which do you think best suits each of the tasks? Does any one set of criteria work for all tasks? Why or why not?

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_____ 1. Student receives 1 point if the sentence makes sense; another point if the grammatical form is correct.

_____ 2. Student receives two scores: a holistic score on the overall quality of the text and a separate score for the ability to control one particular grammar point that has been specified beforehand (for example, definite articles, noun-adjective agreement, etc.)

_____ 3. Student receives a ✓ if s/he has attempted to convey an original message and has written a sufficient amount; a ✓- if the student has either repeated previous messages or has written less than the pre-specified amount; a **0** if the student has written nothing.

_____ 4. Student earns a total score weighted for each of the following categories: content (30%), organization (25%), vocabulary (25%), language (20%).

_____ 5. Student receives a point for a comprehensible, sensible answer.

Consider This: Choose one of the writing tasks presented in this module and indicate briefly how *you* would respond to a student's writing. Then meet with at least two other people who will also be teaching a beginning-level class, and ask them if they agree with the kind of feedback you've chosen for that particular task. On what basis are you assessing the writing? See if you can formulate some criteria that all three of you agree on for evaluating early-stage learners' writing. Be explicit: put them in writing!

Because many of the research findings on students' reactions to writing instruction have been based on data collected from Asian students enrolled in U.S. universities, recent studies have begun to look at the effect that students' cultural background may have on their reactions to current innovations in second language writing pedagogy: peer review groups and revised evaluation procedures, in particular. Zhang (1995) notes that many ESL students do not welcome peer reviews of their writing; they prefer receiving feedback only from the teacher. Why do you think this is? What must these learners understand the purpose of writing to be? And do North American students enrolled in foreign language classrooms in the United States react to writing assignments and evaluation criteria like ESL learners (because they have had similar language learning experiences) or the same way they do in

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their first language (because they have already experienced this type of writing pedagogy in English)?

The type of writing that we ask students to do—if any at all—ultimately depends upon our assessment of the function that writing has in the curriculum. If you decide to treat writing only as grammatical gymnasium, then the issues of purpose, audience, and context are of merely tangential importance: your primary goal will be to ensure structural accuracy, and the students will see their task in a similar way. On this point, the research evidence is clear: students' expectations regarding feedback and evaluation mirror their teachers' attitudes toward writing. Teachers who give precedence to grammatical accuracy, regardless of the task—either by weighting it more heavily or as the sole evaluation criterion—encourage students to revise their written work by changing only surface features and not substantive issues like content, logical argumentation, and organization in their writing. Teachers then need to ask themselves how important a grammatically accurate product is, if its substance is questionable.

Conclusion

Given beginning learners' limited control over linguistic structures, writing in the foreign language—especially composition-oriented writing—can become an onerous, frustrating activity when it asks students to continually do things well beyond their level of expertise. Teachers who understand the communicative nature of writing, as well as some basic principles of second language acquisition, will be able to defuse such an undesirable situation, permitting students to experience writing as the dangerous, magical, furtive, courageous, expressive activity it is. For "the great art of writing is the art of making people real to themselves with words" (Logan Pearsall Smith, U.S. essayist, 1886-1946) while "the desire to write grows with writing" (Desiderius Erasmus, Dutch humanist, 1466?-1536).

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Suggested Additional Reading

Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

An excellent resource book directed toward ESL writing, but with enough emphasis on early-stage learners to be useful also in the foreign language curriculum, it contains many sample writing tasks as well as practical suggestions for managing writing activities in the second language classroom.

Prince, E. (1990). *Write Soon! A Beginning Text for ESL Writers*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan.

In this highly readable text the author demonstrates how to break the writing process into manageable parts, building toward a goal.

Curtain, H.A. & Pesola, C.A. (1994). *Languages and Children—Making the Match*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Although written primarily for teachers of foreign languages in the elementary school, this book includes a variety of concrete examples of very early-stage transcription-oriented tasks that are both communicative and readily adaptable to older learners.

Hedge, T. (1988). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The author has compiled a variety of writing tasks in a clear, very teacher-friendly format. Each task is defined by language level and topic, with step-by-step procedures to follow in class.

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Appendix A

What undergraduates say they read (listed in alphabetical order)

advertisements
bills (telephone, VISA™, power, tuition)
blackboards, bulletin boards (electronic and other), billboards
books (non-fiction and fiction, including textbooks)
catalogs
cereal boxes and other packages
charts, graphs, tables
class notes
comics
computer games, files, windows, manuals
course packs
dictionaries
e-mail
exam questions
forms and applications
graffiti
instructions
jokes and riddles
journal (research) articles
labels
letters (correspondence, personal and business)
libretti (for operas)
magazine articles
memos
menus
news group postings
newspapers (articles, editorials, letters to the editor, advice columns, personals, want ads, film and restaurant reviews)
pamphlets, flyers, brochures
phone messages
plays
poems
posters
puzzles (crossword, word search, logic puzzles)
recipes
religious texts, prayers
riddles and jokes
role play and game handbooks (Dungeons and Dragons™, Warhammer™, Vampire™)
shopping lists
short stories
song lyrics
street signs
subtitles (in foreign films)
T-shirts
telephone directories
TV guide
World Wide Web pages

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Appendix B

Examples of how to expand categories for MindReader transcription task

Topic categories

a fruit
a red fruit
a red summer fruit
a red summer fruit that you eat with your fingers

a part of the body
a part of the body that is above the shoulders
a part of the body above the shoulders and of which you have two

a room in the house
a quiet room in the house
a quiet room in the house where people like to read

Sociolinguistic categories

a second language greeting
a second language greeting used in a formal context
a second language greeting used in a formal context after 7:00 pm

a commonly-used second language expression
a one-word compliment
a one-word compliment used in regard to food

Content categories

a city
a city in a country where the target language is the primary language
a city in X region of a country where the target language is the primary language

a dialect of the second language
a southern dialect of the second language
a southern dialect of the second language that has a strong literary tradition

Personal categories

a relative
a favorite relative
a favorite female relative

what students most like to do
what students most like to do on Saturday mornings
what students most like to do on Saturday mornings with their friends

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Appendix C

Sample journal entries from three different first semester learners of Spanish

Example A

(Student's entry) I like [wrong person of verb] much of my classes this [wrong agreement] semester [wrong construction; either "I like my classes a lot" or "I like many of my classes"]. The books for my advertising [word in English] class for example, are very interesting [missing adjective agreement]. My books on economics are very fascinating [missing adjective agreement], too. The books for Spanish are easy [missing diacritic; missing agreement] understand [missing preposition]. But I believe that one of the books for Spanish isn't really necessary.

(Teacher's comment) Is it boring?

(Student's entry continues) Next week I have two exams [misspelled] in my economics classes. This week I have to [missing "que"] study. Economics is a difficult class understand [missing preposition] sometimes. It is a business class. It is also [missing diacritic] my specialty in the faculty of Arts and Sciences [literal translation from English].

(Teacher's comment) What type of work would you like to do in the future?

Appendix C continues on next page

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Example B

(Student's entry) How are you? Fine, thank you.

The student is writing [wrong verb ending] the paper.

You want to speak Spanish.

You dance well.

We sing a lot.

You all wish to buy the books.

She studies French.

(Teacher's comment) [none]

Example C

(Student's entry) My family is very small [missing adjective agreement], but very close [wrong word; should be 'unida']. My father is a [unnecessary use of article] physical education teacher at/in [wrong word; should be "en"] a secondary [misspelled, misused accent] school. My mother teaches [misspelled; should be "enseña"] special education in the same school [misspelled]. My brother Gary is sixteen [missing diacritic], and he plays [missing preposition] football, basketball, and baseball. My sister Allison is eight and she likes gymnastics [wrong word; should be "gimnástica"].

(Teacher's comment) [correction of all grammatical and lexical errors]

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Appendix D

Student writing sample from Person Description activity

First attempt:
Ha capelli biondi. E' giovane. E' statura mezza. E' magra. E' una donna.

[She has blond hair. She is young. She is medium height. She is skinny. It is a woman.]

Other students' comments:
"bionda" = "ha i capelli biondi"; "giovane" non è utile; se dici "bionda, magra" non è necessario dire "è una donna"

["blonde" = "has blond hair"; "young" isn't useful; if you say "blonde, skinny" (with gender agreement on the adjectives) it isn't necessary to say "it's a woman"]

Revised version:
E' bionda. Ha 20-30 anni. E' statura mezza. E' magra.

[She is blonde, 20-30 years old. She's medium height. She's skinny.]

Teacher's comments:
Per gli Italiani è "alta," non di statura media. E' meglio dire "snella" (invece di "magra"); "magra" dà un'impressione negativa, "snella" è positiva.

[For Italians she is "tall," not medium height (correct form given). It is better to say "slender" (instead of "skinny"); "skinny" is negative, "slender" is positive.]

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